



RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

[New Search](#) | [About RIR's](#) | [Help](#)

23 April 2009

IND103125.FE

India: Dera Sacha Sauda, a religious institution; whether their spiritual leader is facing charges for sexual assault and murder in India; how the public and the authorities perceive and treat members
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Founded in 1948, Dera Sacha Sauda is a spiritual institution (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.b) based in Sirsa, in Haryana state, in northwestern India (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.a), that is led by Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh (BBC 18 May 2007). Dera Sacha Sauda is described by two media sources as a not-for-profit group whose members combine spirituality and social work (*The Independent* 21 May 2007; BBC 18 May 2007). Dera Sacha Sauda claims to accept all religions (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.b). Its followers are mainly low caste Hindus, but also include Sikhs, Muslims and Christians (BBC 18 May 2007). Dera Sacha Sauda's presence is strong in southern Punjab (Madan Lal 7 Jan. 2009, note 16; BBC 18 May 2007), but it is also active in Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan states (ibid.). It claims that "more than [22.5 million] people around the world ... are followers" (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.a). Although according to its website, "Dera Sacha Sauda does not have any links with politics" (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.b), this institution does have some political influence in the Punjab (Madan Lal 7 Jan. 2009, 8 and note 16; *The Tribune* 16 Mar. 2009; BBC 18 May 2007). It encouraged members to vote for a specific party (The Congress) in the 2007 elections in the Punjab (Madan Lal 7 Jan. 2009, 8; *The Independent* 21 May 2007; BBC 18 May 2007; *The Times of India* 18 May 2007). Some sources describe Dera Sacha Sauda as a religious sect (Madan Lal 7 Jan. 2009, 8; BBC 18 May 2007; *The Independent* 21 May 2007; *Frontline* 27 July 2007).

Accusations against the spiritual leader of Dera Sacha Sauda

In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate on 3 April 2009, the Convenor of the Movement Against State Repression (MASR), a not-for-profit organization that documents human rights abuses in the Punjab (MASR n.d.), stated that Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh is facing accusations of "sexual offences and murders" (MASR 3 Apr. 2009; see also BBC 18 May 2007). The charges are regarding three incidents: the murder of a Dera Sacha Sauda member, the murder of a journalist, and the alleged sexual exploitation of Dera Sacha Sauda disciples (*sadhvis*) (*The India Post* 22 Mar. 2009; *The Times of India* 11 Jan. 2009; *United News of India* 10 Jan. 2009). According to the Convenor of the MASR, the spiritual leader of Dera Sacha Sauda is out on bail and is being protected by government security as well as by his own security guards (MASR 3 Apr. 2009). An article published by the *United News of India* also states that Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh enjoys protection provided by the government of Haryana state (27 Mar. 2009).

How the public and the authorities perceive and treat Dera Sacha Sauda members

According to the Convenor of MASR, Sikhs from the Punjab view Dera Sacha Sauda members with disapproval (3 Apr. 2009). *The Panthic Weekly*, a publication directed at the Sikh community that has as one of its main objectives "to counter anti-Sikh propaganda" (The Panthic Network n.d.), states that the Sacha Sauda organization is "an anti-Sikh cult, devoted to [causing] sacrilege and blasphemy against Sikh values and beliefs" (*The Panthic Weekly* 13 Mar. 2009). Resentment of Dera Sacha Sauda members emerged within the Sikh community after an incident in May 2007 in which Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh performed a religious ceremony and conducted rituals while he was dressed like a Sikh guru (*Frontline* 27 July 2007; *The Tribune* 20 June 2007; *The Independent* 21 May 2007). The Sikh community considers this action "deeply offensive" (ibid.). In the midst of this uproar, the Akal Takht, "the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs" (*United News of India* 22 Mar. 2009b), called for a "social boycott" of Dera Sacha Sauda members and of their leader, and called for a "closure of all 'deras' of the Sacha Sauda in the Punjab" (ibid. 5 Mar. 2009). In response to this call, many Sikh organizations announced that *Shaheedi Jathas*, "voluntary squads who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a righteous cause," would be sent to the deras (*The Panthic Weekly* 13 Mar. 2009.).

Some incidents of violent clashes between the Sikh community and Dera Sacha Sauda members reported by the media are described below.

On 20 June 2008, a member of the Sikh community who was protesting against the leader of Dera Sacha Sauda was killed, which led to riots during which 1,500 Sikhs-some armed with swords-blocked access to parts of Mumbai to demand the arrest of the leader of Dera Sacha Sauda (US 19 Sept. 2008).

On 3 March 2009, a group of young Sikhs chanted slogans (*United News of India* 3 Mar. 2009) and tried to prevent Dera Sacha Sauda from delivering a religious speech (*Naam Charcha*) (*Indian Express.com* 17 July 2007). The police intervened immediately and five Sikhs were injured when police tried to disperse the crowd (*United News of India* 3 Mar. 2009).

On 4 March 2009, armed activists from the Ek Noor Khalsa Fauj, an armed religious Sikh group (*Frontline* 19 July 2008), attacked and injured two Dera Sacha Sauda members who were returning to their village after a meeting of the group (*The Tribune* 4 Mar. 2009).

On 15 March 2009, an article published in the *United News of India* stated that a group of Sikhs had once again tried to disrupt a religious speech (*Naam Charcha*) by Dera Sacha Sauda in a village in the district of Sangrur in the Punjab. Members of the two groups threw stones at one another, and approximately ten people were injured, including police officers who tried to intervene (*The Times of India* 17 Mar. 2009; *United News of India* 15 Mar. 2009). An article published in *The Tribune* describes a similar incident that occurred on the same day in the district of Faridkot in the (16 Mar. 2009).

The leader (*Jathedar*) (SGPC n.d.) of Takht Damdama Sahib, the fifth Takht of Sikhs (*The Tribune* 3 Jan. 2003), announced that, in a bid to close down the Dera Sacha Sauda headquarters in Salabatpura, the Shaheedi Jathas would march to the headquarters every Sunday, starting on 22 March 2009 (*ibid.* 16 Mar. 2009). In response to this announcement, the police made "elaborate security arrangements" (*United News of India* 22 Mar. 2009a). Police officers were deployed around the dera in Salabatpura in the days leading up to that date (*The Tribune* 20 Mar. 2009). All visitors were monitored and had to be entered in a register (*ibid.*). Vehicles were also monitored within a 10 kilometre radius (*ibid.*). On 22 March 2009, a number of Sikh groups marched toward the dera in Salabatpura to demand that it, and all the deras in the state, be closed (*United News of India* 22 Mar. 2009b). Some participants were arrested and taken to the police station (*ibid.*).

How authorities perceive and treat members of Dera Sacha Sauda

According to the Convenor of MASR, the government deploys measures to ensure that members of Dera Sacha Sauda can practise their religion freely (3 Apr. 2009). He added that the government also ensures that they are not victims of "discrimination" in terms of government services (MASR 3 Apr. 2009). The Convenor did not elaborate on the kinds of measures taken. According to media reports, the police have intervened to prevent violence during the Sikh community's protests against members of Dera Sacha Sauda (*The Tribune* 20 Mar. 2009; *The Times of India* 17 Mar. 2009; *United News of India* 16 Mar. 2009).

The Convenor of MASR stated that 20 or 25 years ago, Dera Sacha Sauda received "patronage" from the Punjab because the state wanted to isolate the Sikhs who were advocating for greater power and autonomy (3 Apr. 2009). According to Madan Lal, "various political parties ... take upon themselves the responsibility of safeguarding religious sects and thus make sure of their support in elections. e.g. Dera Sacha Sauda" (7 Jan. 2009, 8). An article published by *The Times of India* reports that this is the case for the Akali (Shiromani Akali Dal, SAD) and Congress parties, in particular (18 May 2007). After the elections for the House of the People (*Lok Sabha*, LS) were announced for 16 April 2009 (Maps of India n.d.), tensions between members of Dera Sacha Sauda and "radical" Sikh groups intensified due to their political differences (*The Tribune* 16 Mar. 2009). Some Sikh groups have accused the Punjab state government of cooperating with members of Dera Sacha Sauda in order to secure their support during the elections (*United News of India* 29 Jan. 2009).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 18 May 2007. Jyotsna Singh. "What is Behind Sikh Protests?" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6670569.stm> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

Dera Sacha Sauda. N.d.a "What is Dera Sacha Sauda?" <<http://derasachasauda.in/index.html>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. N.d.b. "Principles of Dera Sacha Sauda." <<http://derasachasauda.in/principles.html>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

Frontline. 19 July 2008. Ajoy Ashrirwad Mahaprashasta. "Remote Control." (*The Hindu*) <<http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl2515/stories/20080801251503100.htm>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 27 July 2007. Annie Zaidi. "Faith and Conflict." (*The Hindu*) <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2414/stories/20070727003302800.htm>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

The Independent [London]. 21 May 2007. Jerome Taylor. "Cult Leader Sparks Sikh Riots with 'Guru' Stunt." <<
http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/cultleader_sparks-sikh-riots-with-guru-stunt-449763.html>>
[Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

The India Post. 22 March 2009. "Dera Sacha Sauda Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Case Adjourned for 25th April." <<http://www.theindiapost.com/2009/03/22/era-sacha-sauda-chief-gurmeet-ram-rahim-singh-case-adjourned-for-25th-april/>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

Indian Express.com. 16 July 2007. C.B. Singh. "Dera Chief Car Attacked, 20 Hurt." <<http://www.indianexpress.com/story-print/205232/>> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2009]

Lal, Madan. 7 January 2009. *Political Dynamics of Religious Sects in Punjab*. Documentation presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.
<http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p282777_index.html> [Accessed 3 Apr. 2009]

Maps of India. N.d. "India 2009 Elections." <<http://www.mapsofindia.com/election/india-election-2009/>> [Accessed 14 Apr. 2009]

Movement Against State Repression (MASR). 3 April 2009. Correspondence sent by the Convenor.

_____. N.d. "What is MASR?" <<http://www.masrglobal.org/home-page.htm>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

The Panthic Network. N.d. "About Us." <<http://help.panthic.net/?site=About>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

The Panthic Weekly. 13 March 2009. "Shaheedi Jathas to Seek Closing of Salabatpura Dera." <<http://www.panthic.org/news/125/ARTICLE/4811/2009-03-13.html>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). N.d. "Jathedar." <<http://www.sgpc.net/glossary/Jathedar.asp>> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2009]

The Times of India. 17 March 2009. "10 Policemen Injured in Sikh-Dera Clashes." (Factiva)

_____. 11 January 2009. "Witness in Dera Cases Alleges Threat, Police Lodge DDR." (Factiva)

_____. 18 May 2007. "Dera Sacha Sauda and Gurmeet Ram Rahim." <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2060431.cms>> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2009]

The Tribune [Chandigarh, India]. 28 March 2009. "Sadhvi Quizzed in Dera Case." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090329/haryana.htm#9>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 20 March 2009. "Normalcy Prevails Inside Dera Salabatpura." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090321/bathinda.htm#1>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 16 March 2009. S.P. Sharma. "Dera Row: 7 Cops, 8 Sikhs Hurt." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090317/bathinda.htm#3>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 4 March 2009. Rajay Deep. "Assault on Dera Followers, Two Hurt." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090305/bathinda.htm#1>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 20 June 2007. Chander Parkash. "Arrest Warrant Against Dera Chief." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070621/main5.htm>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

_____. 3 January 2003. Chander Parkash. "Nangarh is Takht Damdama Sahib Jathedar." <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030104/main3.htm>> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2009]

United News of India. 27 March 2009. "Haryana Withdraws Security Cover to 68 People." (Factiva)

_____. 22 March 2009a. "Agitation Punjab Sacha Sauda Two Last Bathinda." (Factiva)

_____. 22 March 2009b. "Sikh Activists Proceeding to Sacha Sauda 'Dera' Held." (Factiva)

_____. 16 March 2009. "100 Booked in Dera-Sikh Clash Case." (Factiva)

_____. 15 March 2009. "DSP, 12 Policemen Injured in Dera-Sikh Case." (Factiva)

_____. 5 March 2009. "Ahead of Polls, Takht Reminds Sikhs of 'Boycott' of Sacha Sauda." (Factiva)

_____. 3 March 2009. "Police Lathicharge Sikh Youths Opposing Dera Naam Charcha." (Factiva)

_____. 29 January 2009. "Social Boycott Edict Against Sacha Sauda Stands: Akal Takht." (Factiva)

_____. 10 January 2009. "Witness Deposes in Rape Case Against Dera Chief." (Factiva)

United States (US). 19 September 2008. Department of State. "India." *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*. <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108500.htm>> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2009]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The Director of the India Centre for Human Rights and the Law, a lawyer with the Committee for Information and Initiative on Punjab (CIIP) as well as the Deputy Secretary of the National Human Rights Commission in New Delhi were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: ABC Live, Amnesty International (AI), European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme (FIDH), Freedom House, *The Hindu*, Human Rights Watch (HRW), India eNews, International Crisis Group, International Press Institute (IPI), NDTV.com, Reporters sans frontières (RSF), Tehelka, United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), United States (US) Department of State.

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.